

# GHOSTLINESS AND POLITICS OF INTEGRATION IN STEVE CARTER'S *HOUSE OF SHADOWS*

KOUMA Yao Katamatou

*Université de Lomé-TOGO*

[gilbertoyao@gmail.com](mailto:gilbertoyao@gmail.com)

## ABSTRACT

The politics of integration launched by civil rights movement in the 1960s has a few decades later failed, because recent surveys show that re-segregation is considerably increasing in America. This arouses myriad controversial questions addressed by two opposing views. On the one hand, the radical anti-integrationist critics, and, on the other hand, the neo-integrationist activists. For the latter, racial integration remains a key vector to eradicating segregation. Therefore, it sought to redefine the term 'integration' which is still polysemous. The objective of this article is to propose a new definition, by showing, in light of psychoanalytic theory, the slavery entailments in the failure of the existing American integration process. This article posits that an exhaustive definition of 'integration' should take into account the impacts of slavery as depicted in Steve Carter's *House of Shadows*.

## KEYWORDS:

**dehumanization, integration, reasoning, slavery, social rights**

## RÉSUMÉ

La politique d'intégration lancée par le mouvement pour les droits civiques dans les années 1960 a été un échec tragique, parce que les dernières études montrent que la ré-ségrégation gagne considérablement du terrain aux Etats-Unis. Ce qui suscite de nombreuses questions débattues par deux tendances contradictoires. D'une part les anti-intégrationnistes radicaux, et, d'autre part les néo-intégrationnistes qui soutiennent que l'intégration est un vecteur essentiel pour éradiquer la ségrégation. Par conséquent pour le succès de cette politique, il faut redéfinir le terme 'intégration' qui reste polysémique. L'objectif de cette étude est de proposer un nouveau modèle d'intégration en montrant, à la lumière de la théorie psychanalytique, les implications de l'esclavage dans l'échec de la politique d'intégration précédente. Cet article soutient qu'une définition exhaustive du terme 'intégration', doit prendre en compte les impacts de l'esclavage tels que décrits par Steve Carter dans sa pièce théâtrale *House of Shadows*.

## MOTS-CLÉS :

déshumanisation, droits civiques, esclavage, intégration, raison

## INTRODUCTION

The civil rights movement salient achievements, notably the 1954 Brown decision and the 1964 Act, have aroused a ray of hope for a better integrated communal life among American citizens. However, this optimism, a few years later, completely faded away. Recent surveys on racial segregation conducted by several scholars are awfully alarming. In 2006, the critics, Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee observed: “segregation is not gone” (2006: 4), because it is rather increasing and hampering the integration process. Alex Mulnar, in the same vein, believes “racism persists in the minds, hearts and actions of too many Americans and sadly continues to be transmitted to children.” (1989: 72). This persistence illustrates the failure of the integration process. One reason is that African American celebrated radical critics who have strongly denied integration politics, Amiri Baraka, et al. champion anti-integration, because this politics is purely another form of alienation. Its adherents seek the minority to mix up with white mainstream. Drowning black cultural values, histories, memories, spirits, and identities into the white dominating culture, is completely eradicating the footprints of their existence in America. Therefore, August Wilson plainly declares: “We cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products. We reject, without reservation, any attempt by anyone to rewrite our history...” (1996: 36)

Contrary to the radicals, many integrationist activists sustain that integration remains a key factor to overcome racial segregation. It is, for Sharon A. Stanley, “the proper cure of segregation.” (2017: 2). In the same vein, Elizabeth Anderson overemphasizes that “if segregation is a fundamental cause of social inequality and undemocratic practices, then integration promotes greater equality and democracy.” (2010: 2). In light of these quotations, racial integration becomes *sine qua non* a tool to erase racism and social injustices in America.

However, the word ‘integration’ is polysemous. Kennedy opines: “the discussion of race is shrouded with confusion because some key words such as integration are often used with little attention to the complexities they embody. (Ambroise Medegan, 2011: 77) In order to resurrect the process, it implies to redefine the concept referring to “physical proximity, multicultural hybrid and sexual intimacy”. (Idem)

I line up behind this, to assert that in order to exhaustively redefine ‘integration’ it is compulsory to reassess the impacts of slavery as depicted by the playwright Steve Carter in *House of Shadows*. (1986) In other words, considering the intricacy

of interracial marriages in the play, it appears that the concept of integration impels a redefinition which cannot eschew a profound scrutiny of slavery, the bedrock of racism and social injustices in America.

This article aims to explore, in light of Sigmund Freud's perspective of psychoanalytic theory, slavery entailments in the failure of the American integration process. It suggests a new definition which reconsiders black history.

## 1. SLAVERY: A HUMAN DISTORTION TOOL

The ageless racial discrimination that trammels the politics of integration advancement in America is the manifest of humanness misunderstanding. Owing to its savagery, slavery has remained a tangible proof of that inhumanity. Whether slavery is influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution that "all life is related and has descended from a common wild ancestor" (2009: 12), or denies the Biblical assumption that "man is created in the image of God" (Genesis: 1-26), the aftermaths show that the initial conception of human being has been deeply distorted into slavery. Slavery has utterly robbed man's intrinsic values. It becomes a virus that completely denaturalizes him. This dehumanization, in *House of Shadows*, is embodied by some haunted characters who suffer from the ghost of slavery. That specter severely disables their psychological and physical abilities. They become vulnerable of other various illnesses such as mental deficiency, infantilism, sadism, and factitious disorder.

The first fatal thwack is the physical and mental pressures which void man of his humanness. An examination of the ghosts, considered the record apparatus, reveals through the character of Cassie, the weight of slavery. Throughout the play, the traumatic reminiscence of her antsy conversations with Aaron and Majeski always appear as a vivid episode of her eighty year slavery. It reminds the octogenarian of her damned slave status which deeply affects her mental and physical states. Her dead master Majeski, malevolently addressed her that: "Suffer! You must suffer!" (48). This malignity psychologically continues to resonate in her mind as a heavy blow to slump her. It is an instilment to awaken her consciousness. This curse still recalls her that she is just a maid, a slave. Though she sometimes claims her freedom, the shadows of slavery always recall her damnation. This traumatic memory is so crippling that she considers herself less than animal. It reads: "Damn heifer! [...] think I am some damn slave?" (6). She does not feel like a human being. She never thinks she is one. At this very point, the playwright reveals how slavery has denaturalized her. It has voided her of the intrinsic substance, (reason).

Reasoning, which Sigmund Freud refers to as ego, is "the executive system of the mind, responsible for the organization of mental life and the management of social conduct." (Jerrold R. Brandell, 2011: 53). It is the manifestation of freedom. That is

the ability to think, choose, and self-consciously act. Right at the opening of the play, the playwright hints to this deficiency. Cassie is governed by her master Majeski, and Mary, the princess. Like leeches on her, she is incapable to get rid of them, to make her own decision, or to set herself free. She mourns:

“Oh, Lord, come and get me. Come quick, Lord. Please? It just ain’t fair. What you do to people just ain’t fair. You got me in this mess. Why you so mean to people? You make people suffer too long... Ain’t nothing I done...so bad...I should have to suffer this long.”  
(8)

Cassie, the hapless slave, desperately strives to free her psyche of the haunting traumas materialized by the specters of Majeski and Aaron. She lacks self-determination, and her protest is limited to moans as follows: “Way! ‘Way from me, Aaron Shaw! Got no time for you today. ‘Way from me, Devil Aaron.” (5) She is mentally and physically disabled. As a wretched slave, she remains at her mistress’s beck and call, for she is unable to think of efficient strategies to deliver herself from these traumas. The weight of the ghost of slavery has paralyzed her reasoning ability, and completely dehumanized her. Thus, Cassie can be seen as “a symbolic natural slave who does not possess autonomous rationality”. (Matthew Quallen, 2016: 4)

In addition to Cassie’s mental deficiency, Majeski, her master cannot fathom that she is a full human being. Rather he considers her a natural slave as depicted in the following conversation:

MAJESKI: I am white! [...]

CASSIE: ...and I’m your colored maid....

MAJESKI: I always think of you as...

CASSIE: [...] just a maid. A slave...pickin’ up after you...Cleanin’ your mess.

Cleanin’ up after you and your messy, spoiled princess... (35).

The dehumanization of Cassie clearly appears here. Darwin, as quoted by Matthew Quallen, opines, “[a]nimals whom we have made slaves we do not like to consider our equals.” (2016: 4). Cassie, the slave is an animal. Slavery has transformed her into a beast. And owing to the physical and psychological oppressions, she ends up losing her humanness, reason, which is the manifest of her freedom. Thus, slavery has strikingly slandered the initial concept of man, generating another category of human being desperately in quest for equality.

From another angle, the dehumanization in the play refers to psycho-infantilism. It is due, not only to oppression (Cassie), but also to over wellbeing conditions (Mary). Here the ghostliness is seen as an obsession of a well-off living condition, which leads to self-infantilization. This abnormality, embodied by the baby-woman character, Mary, is depicted through lethargy, permanent dependency and irresponsibility.

Mary’s torpidity is one of the symptoms of her mental deficiency that puzzles her

father. It reads:

MAJESKI: You are not well?

MARY: I'm fine, Father.

MAJESKI: You are lazy girl. In bed all day is not good!

MARY: That's what you think. Don't preach, Father. I stay in bed because there's nothing else to do...

MAJESKI: I spoil you, little girl. I give you too much.

MARY: Yes, Father.

MAJESKI: I give you anything. Everything you want...

MARY: Because you love me, Father. Do I not remind you of Mother?

MAJESKI: ...everything you want...

MARY: Not quite everything...

MAJESKI: What? What you ever want that I have not given you.

MARY: If I told you what I really wanted...you'd go crazy...

MAJESKI: What you say?

MARY: I said I'll settle for another house. That's it! Buy me ...my own house. (15)

Majeski worries about his daughter's inactivity which becomes a distressing disease. Since her childhood she has never been active, because she has nothing to do. Meanwhile she permanently depends on her parent and the slaves. She asks for a new house and additional slaves.

MARY: I want a bigger house. I want the biggest house...

MAJESKI: We move to a house more large...

MARY: We only have two servants to do everything...

MAJESKI: Two people to take care of two people. Is not enough? (16)

The playwright highlights the drawbacks of slavery among the masters. Majeski blames himself for spoiling his daughter by purchasing two slave-servants for two people only. Considering Mary's lethargy, her factitious cripple, is not only physical, but also mental. Her father euphemistically has made a shallow observation that she is not well. His naivety does not give insight into the complications, which can be extended to physical and mental paralysis. Her physical disablement is crafted through the wheel chair she has scarcely left. However, the most articulated psycho-infantilism factor is essentially mental. In the following excerpt, Mary infantilizes herself crying hysterically for food:

*(Mary, dressed in faded finery and in a wheel chair, comes out of her room.)*

MARY: Breakfast!

*(Silence)*

I will take breakfast! Now!

*(Silence)*

Where is the girl? Cassie? Cassie? Cassie, I will have my breakfast now...and don't overcook my egg.

*(Silence)*

Cassie? Cassie.... (10)

Mary, the octogenarian woman screams, sobs asking childishly for breakfast. In spite of her age, she remains a child, because she is unable to take her responsibility. Her conscious anachronistic behaviors constitute some effects of mental retardation.

Besides, Mary's mental deficiency results from the obsession of her infantile sexuality. This transpired through the row she had with her father over the new house and her sexual craving. Majeski is aware of his responsibility: "MAJESKI: Is my fault. I spoil you. I do this to you. You are not good person. I do this to you." (16) Mary is not a good person, because she has poor reasoning. "MARY: [...] every house around us here is bigger...grander. We are the laughing stock. The house is too small. We're too small. That's why I stay in bed. I'm ashamed to go out..." (16) Feebleminded adults, like Mary, are adult physically only, but they remain mentally, morally, and emotionally children. Therefore they "lack judgment, reasoning, moral understanding and constraint necessary for acceptable life in society. (Mary Z. Gary, 1977: 138).

Mary, in her childhood, has been victim of sexual troubles, obsessions and violent repressions. Freud asserts that infantile sexuality may refer to "(1) Neurasthenia and the neurosis of anxiety, due to sexual troubles, and (2) Hysteria and the obsessions due to sexual traumata in early childhood". (Havelock Ellis, 2011: 206) From this viewpoint, Mary still remembers when her father broke into her relation with the slave, Aaron. Majeski confessed that he saw them in her room: "I hear the things she say to him. The things he make her say. I see the things she do to him. The things he make her do....I cannot even move to kill them. He make me not move. I have to stand there...and watch." (32) Majeski was shocked to see his daughter having love affairs with a slave. He violently repressed and menaced to murder her. He continues that:

It is a sight I cannot bear to think on. If she were standing before me, this minute, I would kill her. I would put my hands around her throat and choke away the life I gave. I would choke out all her sins and never let them come out for the world to breathe. I should have kill her when I see them together. I should have kill her... (34)

Majeski hates that love relationship, because Aaron is a slave, an animal, inferior, and 'unequal' to Whites. He lacks the requisite requirements to marry a white woman.

It is the birth of racism and social discrimination.

Slavery has sharply distorted the initial perception of human being creating different incompatible categories. Repression, not only has been discriminative for the couple (Mary and Aaron), but mainly, has been one of the roots of Mary's psycho-infantilism. Adam Limentani believes her abnormality results from "infantile rumination." (1992: 110) That deficiency is characterized by the alteration between sexual obsessions for Aaron, and the repressions of her father's ghost since childhood.

In a nutshell, slavery is a dehumanizing institution. It has transformed human being into a defective individual by robbing him of reason and freedom. The enslaved people are physically and mentally shackled and categorized into two groups: the abnormal and the normal ones. In so doing it paves the way for racial segregation which continues to hamper the integration process in America. The traumas still haunt differently the victims and the descendants who frown at any politics of integration.

## 2. SOCIAL RIGHTS TO RE-HUMANIZATION

The playwright Carter advocates social rights as a model to re-humanize man and to reinforce the integration process in America. If the integration politics remains a failure, it is because the misinterpretation of black history has been the principal cause. Therefore, to succeed, the inherited concept of mankind bred by enslavement must be redefined.

Until recently, many scholars still believe that human beings can be sorted according to "their racial features which are not socially constructed but rooted in human biology". (Peter Wade, 2004: 58) And this belief has overwhelmed the western scientific and popular circles throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and a good part of the twentieth centuries. (Idem) Today, a tremendous attempt is made to readjust the term and its meaning by re-focusing on human uniqueness. If we consider that all human beings are created equal and they are endowed with reason and conscious, then these equal features constitute the man uniquenesses. It implicitly means that all human differences, including skin color, which have been so long the source of social inequalities and racial discrimination, are indeed cultural patterns. Peter Wade asserts that "race is socially constructed" (Peter Wade, 2002: 4). Meaning that he does not define race through physical traits. Thusly the task consists of recreating a new socio-political condition to fertilize the ground for the latent human potentialities. Carter, in *House of Shadows*, suggests through characterization the promotion of social rights as a key medium to re-establish mankind. He laid emphasis on the quest for dignity, freedom, equal justice, and responsibility.

Firstly, searching for human dignity is an attempt to recover the lost intrinsic qualities by avoiding humiliation and debasement. Among several definitions of

dignity Carter's approach matches with Kantian concept which advocates that man should not be "instrumentalized" (Bernard Baertschi, 2014: 3). In other words, one should not be enslaved. So, Cassie, after many decades in slavery, claims her right. Her undertaking is a tentative to regain the required values a complete man needs. That completeness is sacred. Any degrading condition, affecting his humanness will render him invalid. Cassie has been invalid for many decades, because she has been kept in disdainful conditions where she has lost her manhood. Knowing that human freedom and dignity are unconditional, Cassie firmly claims them by demanding Mary to regard her as a human being, a woman, equals to her, but not as an eternal salve. She said:

CASSIE: [...] Damn heifer! One ! two! Three! Think I'm some damn slave? Think I'm some damn slave pickin' up after your behind? Four! Five! Never happen! Six! Seven! Think you still some damn princess and I'm your slave? Eight! That mess can stay right where you threw it, for all I care. It can stay right there 'till it rot and small like you! (6)

Cassie boldly rejects any humiliating donkeywork. Her protest earns her dignity. It elevates her to another social status. She does not behave anymore as a damn slave, but as a full human being fighting for her rights.

Moreover, her address to the princess echoes as a firm disciplinary recommendation to (Mary) a stubborn child. She rather appears not as a slave under pressure, but as a liberal mistress giving instructions to her maids. Her interrelationship with Mary, the princess, is completely reversed. Immanuel Kant, as quoted by Bernard Baertschi, opines:

the fact that man is aware of an ego-concept raises him infinitely above all other creatures living on earth. Because of this, he is a person. ... He is a being who, by reason of his preeminence and dignity, is wholly different from things such as irrational animals which he can master and rule at will. (2014: 3).

Human dignity resides first in self-esteem, "ego-concept", which lifts man above all other living creatures and things on earth. Contrary to slavery, which debases and dehumanizes, dignity humanizes and classifies man at his proper status. That is what Cassie struggles for by holding her head upright, avoiding humiliation and infantilization. She claims respect, not because she is a slave, but because she feels she deserves it. Kant explains: "It is not because others have a value that one should respect them, but one should respect them because they have an importance and a dignity." (Oliver Sensen, 2011: 2). In this light, any human being naturally should be self-esteemed and respected, because his dignity is inalienable.

Furthermore, the playwright, through the ghost of Majeski, shows that infantilization which is another form of self-debasement and self-dehumanization should be surmounted through the quest for autonomy. He believes dignity resides in self-reliance which is another form of self-expression. Majeski teaches his daughter, who remains



an adult-baby, to reassess herself as a grown up woman to quest for independence. That is to say, if we consider infantilization, a form of feeble-mindedness, which deprives man of his humanness, then an adult-baby is not a complete and psychologically balanced human being. He lacks the ability to rationally and independently plan for his own life. Reasoning is inherent to man, it constitutes the gap between him and other living species, and it is the manifest of his freedom. The ability to reasonably revel in that freedom is a form of personal dignity. O'Mahony made an insightful point:

The connection between dignity and autonomy is rooted in the concept of rationality, and the view of classical philosophers that what separates humans from other animals is the power of reason. Through exercising this power, human beings are capable of shaping their future and deciding their own destiny. The legal principle of human dignity is intended to be an expression of what makes man "special," in the sense of being worthy of bearing rights; and since what makes man "special" compared to other animals is the power of reason and the ability to shape his own destiny, human dignity has become intrinsically bound up with the idea of personal autonomy and self-determination. (Conor O'Mahony, 2012: 565)

It clearly appears in the quotation above that autonomy constitutes a key factor of human dignity. It is the manifest of self-reliance and self-determination. Therefore, Majeski believes his daughter has to fully exercise all her human potentialities by autonomously reasoning and planning for her own life. He thinks his daughter has to get rid of the wheelchair while she is still physically valid and stop childish cries.

Another important argument is that cultural heritage, either tangible or intangible, is a key medium to significantly re-humanize characters in the play. Eric, Hector, Cassie and Mary meet together and reveal themselves to one another when the two teenagers (Hector and Eric) go on searching for treasure. That treasure is the keys which open the two doors kept secret for long. Their encounter with the ghost, the urn, and other materials which carry on the past life of the family and the community as a whole, reveals the common nexus of their identity. In the following extract the playwright highlights the determination of the youth to dig into their history.

HECTOR: Hey, Lady, how you get them doors open?

CASSIE: What?

HECTOR: Them two funny doors with them things on it won't open. Them's got to be the rooms where you keep all the treasure, ain't it? How you open 'em?

MARY: My room? Is he talking about my old room? My room and Daddy's room had special doors. You won't let them go in my old room, will you Cassie?

ERIC: Them doors even look special. All them funny-lookin' statues and stuff on 'em...

HECTOR: Them's carvin's...

ERIC: Look like the kind of whittlin' my grandpa used to do. (36-37)

Even though Mary prevents them from opening the doors the boys are determined to break in and discover the history kept secret for so long. It is about the cruelty of slavery that Mary endeavors to shroud in secrecy. In other words, the little boys get into the sealed rooms to unveil the haunting past life of their grand-parents. The two haunted rooms, metaphorically stand for the interior life of Mary and Cassie, the octogenarians, who helplessly struggle against the shadows of slavery to heal over. The re-humanization process of the household starts from the breaking into these sealed rooms, which are compared to the psyche of the characters.

HECTOR: I don't know what you talkin' 'bout. Just tell me how I get in them rooms.

CASSIE: You really want to look?

MARY: No No! There's nothing in my room. Only a lot of dead memories. Old secrets that should never come out. Old wounds that should not bleed again. The past keeps that door locked. It's sealed with the nails of memory. (...) Don't let them defile my room.

CASSIE: Would like the keys?

ERIC AND HECTOR: Yeah!

MARY: No! There are ghosts up there... (37)

Mary's confession is a form of psychoanalysis therapy that cures her mental paralysis. The ghosts, the old wounds or the memories confined, refer to the dark past life she has experienced which has denaturalized her. The first door may embody her subconsciousness, a box where the repelled impulses are kept. And the second, her father's room, may refer to all that concerns Majeski, the slaveholder's mischievous attitudes towards the slaves. Now that she exposes them, she starts recovering from her lethargy. The things shrouded in those rooms including the carvings, the urn, the vase, the jar, and other materials constitute the community's cultural heritage. When Mary asserts that: "[...] ghosts that will not sleep. Ghosts that have been waiting to be free...Terrible spirits who should stay locked up there..." (37), she alludes to the dead, (notably Aaron and Majeski,) who epitomize the sequels of slavery. They constitute the living memories that must be kept and handed down to the new generation as any cultural legacy. Eric, Cassie and Aaron are Blacks, Hector a Latino male, whereas Majeski and Mary are Whites. Thus, the casting portrays slavery as a common ground which still unfolds untold episodes about humanity as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this article has been to show how slavery, through ghostliness in Steve Carter's *House of Shadows*, has trammled the American politics of integration, and to propose a novel sustainable model. Basing on Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory, the investigation reveals that the specter of slavery still haunts America. The persistence of racism and social discrimination, tangible proofs of disintegration, is

one of the consequences of slavery which has dehumanized man and sorted him into conflicting categories. Therefore, the promotion of social rights, as a new strategy, permits to fathom human being, to reinterpret black history and preserve cultural legacies in order to enhance the integration process.

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